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PUT YOUR TWO BOTTOM READERS IN YOUR TOP READING GROUP

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About a month ago I received a phone call from a parent. The parent described a fairly typical situation. She had a sixth grade boy who was placed in the fourth grade reader. She was particularly concerned because this was the third year that her son had been placed in the same book and, according to reports from the teacher, the boy was not making any progress. She requested that one of the students from the university do some tutoring with her son. That afternoon, when I met my reading methods class, I asked if someone wanted to tutor a sixth grade boy who was reading a few years below grade level. A student volunteered. I explained that, according to the mother, this was the boy's third time through the book, suggesting that the first thing to find out was whether or not the boy could read the book.

"Simply open the book to several places in the middle and have him read these pages to himself. After he has read a page, ask him to tell you what he has read," I told the tutor. "If recall is fairly limited, ask him some specific questions to see whether or not he can answer questions about what he has read. Finally, listen to him read the page and make a count of the number of words which he call incorrectly or which he is unable to pronounce at all."

I warned the tutor about smart errors. "Remember that all fluent readers make 'smart errors' as they read. This is, they read can't for cannot. They might read 'the old house was in a rundown condition' when the sentence said 'the old hme was in a rundown condition.' These errors are made by all readers, and reflect the fact that during fluent oral reading the eyes stay four or five words ahead of the voice. This eye-voice span is what allows readers to read with expression, and 'smart errors' are made because the reader sees and interprets the appropriate word, the word actually printed on the page, but then in reading it aloud, translates it into a more familiar way of saying it. On the basis of how he reads these pages, decide whether the book is appropriate for him."

The tutor went off and came back a week later. She was quite distraught. "I had him read in that book," she reported. "After he read silently, he could tell he almost nothing about what he had read and could answer very few questions. I then had him read aloud and kept a count of the number of errors he made. In the first hundred words on one page he made over 25 errors. And this is in a book he has already read twice! I can't understand it," the tutor sighed.

Finding out that this sixth grader was on frustration level in the fourth grade book he was reading for the third time was

a surprise to the tutor, but it was precisely what I had expected from the limited information given me by the mother. I reminded the student, "Don't you remember when we talked about placing the students on the appropriate instruction level? I told you that one of the few things we could count on in reading was that when students are placed above the level where they can read most of the words and comprehend most of what they are reading, they will not progress."

I reminded my volunteer tutor of the analogy between frustration level and a ladder with several rungs missing. If you need to climb a ladder and there are no rungs missing, you just climb the ladder with no trouble at all (independent level). If, however, that ladder has one rung missing, you can probably climb it with some extra effort and a boost from somebody. A ladder with one rung missing (instructional level) can still be climbed. Imagine now that the ladder has two rungs missing. It is probable that a few could make that leap across the space of two missing rungs. However, if the ladder was the only way to enter a burning building in which there was someone you cared very deeply about, you might still be able to put forth the herculean effort and somehow cross the two missing rungs. Now a ladder with three missing (frustration level) rungs is useless to you no matter how motivated you might be to climb that ladder. We conceptualize frustration level as the level of material which is so far above the student's decoding ability or conceptual level that the student cannot read that material with comprehension no matter how hard the student or the teacher tries.

"But, he has been in that book for three years!" the tutor said. "Exactly," I replied. "And his instructional level is probably where it was three years ago." I then provided the tutor with some high-interest, low-vocabulary materials at second and third grade level and told her to find the student's appropriate instructional level, the level at which he could read orally and not make more than four or five dumb errors per one hundred words, and the level at which he could understand a good deal of what he had read. "Find the student's instructional level and begin there," I said, "and explain to the mother why you cannot tutor him using the frustration level book. If you get a chance, you might also go and talk to the teacher," I suggested. "Tell her that the reason he is not making progress in spite of three years spent on this book is that it is at frustration level."

"I don't understand it," the tutor remarked. "His teacher is one of the graduates from our program." That information—the boy's teacher was a graduate from our program—was the final blow.

"Talk to her. Tell her my advice is to put him into the top reading group." The tutor looked at me as if I had lost my mind.

"Whatever for?" she demanded. "Because" I responded, "he's on frustration level reading the fourth grade book and he's not going to get any better as long as he remains on that level. He might as well be placed in the top group which is probably reading in the sixth grade book. He would still be on frustration level, but at least his self-concept would be enhanced by being placed

with the top readers. In fact," I told the student as she exited my office, "I'm going to write an article called 'Put Your Two Bottom Readers In Your Top Reading Group'."

This year I have been working in three high schools attempting to help the teachers of low level English classes teach their basic students reading and writing skills. In classroom after classroom, I find ninth, tenth, eleventh, and twelfth graders reading at third, fourth, and fifth grade levels. "How can it happen?" the English teachers ask me. "How can they get here? And after all those years of reading instruction in the elementary and middle grades, if they haven't learned to read any better by now, what can I possibly do about it?"

While I don't know the history of these high school students who read so far below grade level, my guess is that in most cases these students were the lowest readers in their classrooms. When they went to fourth, fifth, and sixth grade, their teachers probably had three reading groups. The top reading group doubtless read in a grade level book, the next group read in a book a level below. The bottom reading group probably read in a book two or three levels below grade level. Consequently, in most fifth grade classrooms one finds a group of children reading in the fifth grade level book, a group of children reading in the fourth grade level book, and a group of children reading in the 3(1) book. If you sat down with each of the children placed in the 3(1) book and individually administered an IRI to determine each pupil's appropriate instructional level, you would probably find, out of seven children, three of them in the 3(1) book actually testing on an informal reading inventory at the 3(1) level. One child may read at the 3(2) level, another child may read at the 2(2) level, and the other two children (boys?) may read at the 2(1) and the first reader level. All seven of these children are placed in the 3(1) book and then go into the 3(2) book. This is probably the only reading that these fifth graders do that is even close to instructional level. Their science and social studies books are at frustration level. It is most unlikely that they ever pick up a book and read it just because they enjoy reading. Thus, they possibly never read anything at an independent level, a level where reading is so easy you don't have to work at it.

At the end of fifth grade, if you tested these children again, you might find that the three children reading at the 3(1) level and the child reading at the 3(2) level have indeed increased their reading instructional level to that required by the fourth grade book. When they go to sixth grade and are placed in the fourth grade book, they may continue to increase their reading abilities and instructional level. Now the one child who was at the 2(2) level and was placed in the 3(1) book may have moved up to the fourth grade instructional level, if he was especially motivated and worked extra hard, if his teacher provided him with extra help, or if his parents helped him at home or rewarded him in some way for doing well in reading. That boy was trying to climb a ladder with two rungs missing. It can be done but requires great effort as well as a boost from a friend.

What about the boys whose instructional levels were 2(1) and first reader? What do you expect to find their instructional

level to be when they are tested in June? If you guessed 2(1) and first reader, you are likely to be right. Placed all year in reading material with three rungs missing on the ladder, these two boys could not make any progress up that ladder. They would have been better off spending the year in the top group. Their reading level would probably not have improved but their self-concept might have.

At this point, you are saying to yourself, "She can't really mean that I should put my two bottom readers into my top reading group." You may be feeling some resentment because you suspect that I am going to suggest forming an additional reading group for the two boys. "Does she know how hard it is to meet with all the different groups and teach all the subjects an intermediate teacher is required to teach? Has she ever been there?" Questions such as these may be occurring to you, plus a few you are too kind to express.

The solution to the problem of putting all children on their appropriate instructional levels for reading instruction is one of the most difficult problems teachers face. No teacher can effectively teach four or five different reading groups each day and do an adequate job of teaching the other subject areas. There are some adjustments, however, which can be fairly easily integrated into most classrooms and which will result in all children reading materials at the appropriate level at some point in the day. I am offering five suggestions in hope that most intermediate teachers will find they can successfully implement one or two of them.

1. Have a daily time for Uninterrupted Sustained Silent Reading. Much has been written in recent years about the need for children to practice their reading skills. The concept of having a time every day when each child chooses something to read is especially important for those students whose reading level is far below grade level. If a teacher rounds up books and magazines on a variety of reading levels (including some highly interesting books written at low readability levels), if the teacher enforces the rule that everyone reads (teacher included) and if the teacher sees to it that no stigma is attached to reading the easy books, low readers will eventually begin to choose materials they can read. The teacher can then feel confident that for at least a few minutes each day, the low readers are not reading material at their frustration level. (For more information about how to start and keep a USSR program going, see Hunt, 1971, and Gambrell, 1978.)

2. Determine the instructional levels for all students placed in the low reading group. You will doubtless have a range of several levels (book 1, 2(1), 2(2) or 2(2), 3(1), 3(2) for example). Plan your week's instruction so that some of the time is spent in the book at the highest level and some of the time is spent in the book at the lowest level. While the lowest readers will be on their frustration level in the highest books, they will be at instructional level some of the time. Don't worry about the students who can read in the highest level books. When reading the easier books, they will be getting some practice at independent level. Since low readers do not like to read, they seldom read on their own and thus get almost no practice in independent level material.

3. If your group consists of readers at several different levels, follow the instruction for skills outlined in the lowest level book. For many poor readers, their mastery of reading skills is below the level at which they can read and comprehend. Carry out the skills instruction using the lowest level manual with the entire group. For actual reading in the book, divide the group according to reading level. Meet one day each week with each reading level group. Introduce stories to be read, including vocabulary and purposes and do follow-up activities for stories read during previous week. A teacher who has a group consisting of students at the 2(1), 2(2) and 3(1) levels might organize his/her week as follows:

Monday Meet with whole group for skills instruction for 30 minutes. Assign skills practice work for completion while meeting with other groups.

Tuesday Meet with students in 2(1) book. Check on reading assigned last Tuesday. Introduce vocabulary and set purposes for stories to be read Wednesday and Thursday.

Wednesday Meet with students in 2(2) book. Check on reading assignment of last Wednesday. Introduce vocabulary, set purposes for stories to be read Thursday and Tuesday.

Thursday Meet with students in 3(1) book. Check on reading assigned last Thursday. Introduce vocabulary and set purposes for stories to be read next Tuesday and Wednesday.

Friday Meet with whole group again for skills instruction.

4. Do a listening-reading transfer lesson each week. Select a story to read to students which lends itself to the purpose you wish to set for listening/reading. If you want to help students to follow the sequence, choose a story in which order is important. To develop the concept of characterization, choose a story which has intriguing characters. Mystery stories are natural vehicles to help students draw conclusions when they are interrupted at a crucial point and students are asked to predict before hearing the conclusion. During the listening portion of the lesson (which may take all of the reading instructional time for one day), read the story to the entire group and lead them through the particular comprehension activity. If you are doing a lesson on sequence, you might want to tell students to listen and "pay particular attention to the order in which important events happened." After listening, ask students to list the important events, then help them to reorder their list. For a lesson on characterization, you may want to brainstorm a list of words which describe people before listening to the story. After hearing the story, students can select from their brainstormed list the words which describe the character in question and come up with descriptive words which suit the character perfectly. The reading of the mystery would be stopped while students wrote down possible conclusions, then the story would be completed and predictions verified or rejected. On the following day, students do exactly what they did after listening except that they read a different story. A story is selected from the appropriate book for each level. Students are asked to read the story and do exactly what they did yesterday after listening. Following the listening

for sequence lesson, students would read and list the major events and reorder them. Following the listening for characterization lesson, students would read the story, select adjectives from the list brainstormed for the listening lesson, and add appropriate adjectives. To practice drawing conclusions, students should stop at a certain point and make predictions before continuing to read to verify predictions. In a listening/reading transfer lesson, students learn and practice what they are required to do while working with the easier listening mode. When they are asked to do the same task after reading, they understand their purpose for reading and are able to carry out the task more independently. (For more details about listening/reading transfer lessons see Cunningham, 1975.)

5. Let your lowest readers listen to a tape of a book at their instructional level. They should read along with the tape until they can read the book independently. This strategy, called imitative reading, allows students to read at their level with little assistance from the teacher except for making or finding tapes and checking to see that students can read one book before going on to the next. (For more details, see Cunningham, 1979.)

There are some problems inherent in trying to place students in books at their instructional level. This is especially true of the basal readers currently in use which, as Bradley and Ames (1977) demonstrated empirically and most of us suspected, have a great deal of variability of difficulty level within each book. In spite of this intrabook variability, it is apparent that in many classrooms, the lowest readers are placed in below-grade-level books which they still cannot read. Arnold and Sherry (1975) found that the disabled readers referred to their reading clinic were placed in below-level books in their classrooms, but that their fifth graders who read at the 2(1) level according to clinic estimates were, on the average, placed at 3(2) level in the classroom.

All teachers have a nearly impossible-to-perform job description. Intermediate teachers find it especially difficult to place all students on the appropriate reading level because there are so many different reading levels in each classroom and because they have the responsibility for teaching all subject areas.

In this article, I have tried to suggest ways of adapting instruction so that the lowest readers do some reading each week at their instructional levels. If you cannot implement any of the suggestions I've made, and cannot think of alternative ways of providing appropriate reading materials, my original suggestion still stands. "Put your two bottom readers in your top reading group."

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